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**RELEVANCE OF RELIGIOUS LEADER ENGAGEMENT
FOR THE AIR FORCE CHAPLAIN COPRS**

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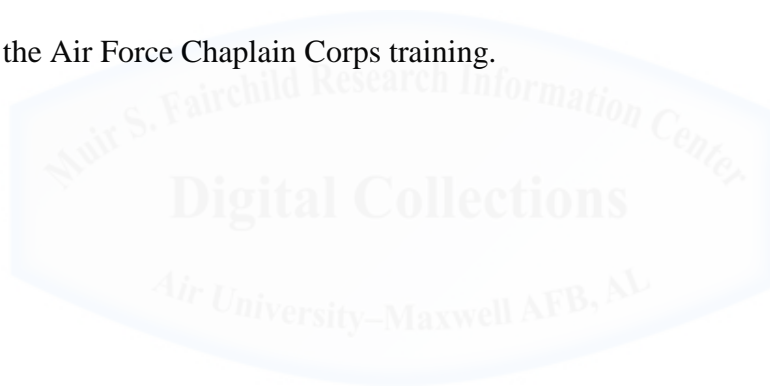
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Abstract

The relationship between religion and the Air Force has been tenuous in recent years. Nonetheless, Air Force chaplains have played a role, not only as spiritual caregivers to Airmen, but also as an agent of Religious Leader Engagement on deployments in an informal manner. As the nature of warfare continues to evolve toward a non-traditional format, interactions with local populace and understanding of their cultural and religious background will become more important. Though the Air Force Chaplain Corps does not train for Religious Leader Engagement formally, as a joint force, more consideration will need to be given to incorporate this skill set into the Air Force Chaplain Corps training.



Over the past decade or so, the Air Force has struggled with the issues of religion and religious expression within the Air Force. Back in August 2005, the Air Force published the *Interim Guidelines Concerning Free Exercise of Religion in the Air Force* to address concerns raised at the Air Force Academy regarding unwelcomed proselytization. And, as recently as November 2014, an update of the Air Force Instruction 1-1 was made to “clarify guidance for how commanders should handle religious accommodation request or when Airmen’s rights to free exercise are questioned.”¹ The controversies that precipitated these documents are based on the supposition that private faith beliefs and practices should not enter into the public realm of the military, a government organization. Yet, over the same ten plus years, the US military has been engaged in combat operations among people who do not necessarily espouse a clear religious and secular divide. In fact, many would argue that some of the greatest successes of stability operations in Afghanistan and Iraq came about when religion and culture were factored into the operations equation. Consequently, in 2013, the Army acknowledged the importance of religion in its operations by publishing the Army Technical Publication (ATP) 1-05.03, *Religious Support and External Advisement* to provide guidance on religious leadership engagement (RLE) operations for their Chaplain Corps.² Later that same year, the value of religion in international relations and diplomacy was affirmed when the White House released its first *National Strategy on Religious Leader and Faith Community Engagement*.³ So, in such a bifurcated environment where there is an aversion to religion in government but also a need for religious and cultural aptitude in carrying out government policy, the question arises: Is RLE relevant for the unique mission set of the Air Force Chaplain Corps?

As mentioned above, in the US--maybe even, in most of the “Western” world--there is a division between religion and politics. As Peter Mandaville and Sara Silvestri point out, though

secularism is only a couple centuries old, our “national and international institutions still operate under the impression...that secularism is a permanent, eternal, and appropriate configuration for the relationship between religion and public life.”⁴ Even though international institutions such as the United Nations pass laws to protect human rights (including the freedom of religion for indigenous people⁵), when it comes to Western politics and policies for the Western world, religion is a taboo...perhaps, even an offensive topic. In fact, there are several well-funded organizations, like the Military Religious Freedom Foundation and the Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers, that lobby aggressively to ensure that religion has no part in the military or any other government organizations. Furthermore, there are others, like Fox News commentator, Ralph Peters, who argue that engaging religious groups and RLE in military operations are pointless.⁶

Certainly, religion can be a very highly volatile subject. People on both sides of the spectrum hold very strong feelings about religion and its place, not only in their personal life, but also, in the public sphere. As Jon Cutler, a Jewish US Navy Reserve chaplain,⁷ explains, “Religions can foster both ill, as a catalyst to violent conflicts, and good, as a potent force for brokering reconciliation and sustaining peace.”⁸ In our contemporary environment, where terrorist acts rooted in radical faith beliefs dominate the news cycle, it is reasonable to wish for a strictly secular setting. However, when many of the peoples that the US military engages--whether as an adversary or as innocent bystanders caught in the “crossfire of war”--hold religious beliefs and values as their guiding principle for life, it would be careless to not take religion into consideration when it comes to military operations as well as international relations. In his article, Chaplain Cutler quotes Chris Seiple who says, “Sustainable security cannot be achieved without engaging societies’ own internal ethics. This in turn requires a deep

understanding of the local context--a context that is suffused with religion.”⁹ If the goal of the military, and thereby the US government, is to establish long-lasting peace and positive change in the nations where we conduct operations, religion needs to be seriously considered.

Even though, in the past, religion was often relegated to a subset of discussions about human rights rather than seen as a legitimate medium of diplomacy, religion and RLE are now gaining greater visibility.¹⁰ To ensure that the US State Department focuses adequate attention on religion, two years ago, Secretary of State John Kerry opened a new office called the Office of Religion and Global Affairs (formerly called the Office of Faith-Based Community Initiatives). The goal of this office is to engage faith communities around the world to “advance...shared goals.”¹¹ This movement toward the inclusion of religion in diplomacy is a turn from the standard US predisposition of keeping faith and politics separate. It is, however, clearly the new direction that the US government is taking. For instance, at the 2014 National Prayer Breakfast, President Barak Obama stated: “We’re moving ahead with our new strategy to partner more closely with religious leaders and faith communities as we carry out our foreign policy...So around the world we’re elevating our engagement with faith leaders and making it a regular part of our diplomacy.”¹²

Similarly, in the US military, the Army took the lead in addressing the role of RLE in their operations by releasing a techniques publication on RLE to provide guidance for their Chaplain Corps.¹³ The publication, ATP 1-05.03, incorporates many of the lessons learned from over a decade of stability operations in the Middle East and falls in line with the larger emphasis the Army has placed on “ethnographic intelligence.”¹⁴ However, with the exception of this ATP and a few other overarching guidance memoranda, doctrine and instructions on RLE as well as serious academic research on its tactics and effectiveness is presently lacking. Rather, much of

the evidence of the benefits (or pitfalls) of RLE come from personal accounts of chaplains on deployment. As more and more accounts are gathered, it is hard to deny that RLE, if applied well, can benefit a wide range of both military and diplomatic operations.

For example, in his research paper while at the Air War College, Chaplain Steven Schaick, who is now the Deputy Chief of Chaplains for the Air Force Chaplain Corps, wrote about an experience he had during Operation Northern Watch. One day, Chaplain Schaick was invited by Colonel Forester to accompany him on his rounds visiting Kurdish villages to gather information for the State Department such as birth rates, death rates, cleanliness of water, food supplies, and security concerns. As the US led coalition team sat with tribal leaders, Colonel Forester introduced Chaplain Schaick as the team's "holy man." Though unconventional from the US perspective, the fact that this team brought a "holy man" with them made a big impression on the tribal leaders. In fact, having a "holy man" on the coalition team divested the tribal leaders of their "preconceived notion that Americans were little more than arrogant and Godless crusaders." Furthermore, as Colonel Forester disclosed to Chaplain Schaick later, the level of trust that was experienced by the coalition team "skyrocketed" with Chaplain Schaick's presence.¹⁵ As Chaplain Schaick asserts, "Chaplains and their assistants are uniquely qualified to do what secular diplomats, Civil Affairs Teams and other cannot do--win and preserve peace through sacred association."¹⁶

As Chaplain Schaick states, what is critical here is the "sacred association." Though chaplains are military officers, they are also "holy men" (and "holy women") who are "on loan" to the military by their religious organizations. They are ordained religious leaders who have been set them aside to do sacred works. Furthermore, as Navy Chaplain George Adams writes, "While possessing a good knowledge of other religions and cultures is important, the legitimacy

of chaplains acting as liaisons is based not so much on their expertise in religion as on their position as professional clergy and military officers.”¹⁷ By the very nature of their calling, clergypersons recognize the significance of faith and devotion in the lives of other clergypersons. Additionally, their dedication to serve out their faith convictions as spiritual leaders who, not only maintain religious rituals but also shepherd and care for their congregants, often engenders a general sense of respect from the people, even outside their faith. As Chaplain Adams states, “[Chaplains] position as a spiritual leader tends to create a deeper and more immediate bond between them and civilian religious leaders. Douglas Johnston notes that, in general, religious people are inclined to relate more naturally with other people of faith and engender a greater amount of trust and communication.”¹⁸

Out of this sacred devotion and the call to serve, a good number of chaplains of all ranks and services have taken the lead to both formally and informally engage in RLE during OEF and OIF. One example is Chaplain Brian Waite who while serving with the 3rd Battalion, 2nd Marine Regiment during OIF found himself thrust into the RLE role by his commander. His unit had just completed an assault on Iraqi forces in An Nasiriyah. However, as they were capturing and securing a school in town that was being held by Iraqi forces, a couple Iraqi civilians were killed by US troops because they were being used as human shields by the Iraqi soldiers. Initially, there was a mob of angry townspeople who were upset at the deaths of their neighbors. But, Chaplain Waite was able to assuage the situation by clarifying the situation and assuring the townspeople that their neighbors would be properly buried before sundown in accordance with Islamic custom. Not only was Chaplain Waite able to bring calm to the situation, but he himself gained great credibility for his unit by helping the townspeople dig the graves. His sensitive handling of this volatile situation gained immeasurable trust from the

townspeople who later went on to assist the US forces with valuable intelligence and assistance.¹⁹

The ability to gain genuine trust and forge relationships is a valuable advantage that chaplains can bring to military--especially, stability--operations. As Alexs Thompson, who in his study of RLE in southern Afghanistan, observed, “Afghan religious leaders primary serve the role of a mediator; as trusted leaders of their local communities, they are local advocates to ensure the ISAF projects and intentions match those of the community.”²⁰ Similarly, chaplains are mediators, too, who seek to build bridges and ensure that the right help is being delivered to these communities. Additionally, as mediators, they can serve as the middleperson for commanders. Especially when dealing with cultures where a promise spoken is an irrevocable contract, it is very beneficial to have a mediator who can moderate the demands of local townspeople with a “I will have to ask if it is possible” or a “I do not have the authority but I can pass on your request” sort of message.

The role of a chaplain in RLE, however, extends beyond trust building and serving as a mediator. In places like the continent of Africa where AFRICOM focuses primarily on building alliances, RLE can be very helpful in ameliorating suffering among the people and building relationships with partner nation chaplaincy programs. This is so, especially because as Chaplain Cutler highlights, “Religious organizations are one of the few institutions in Africa that have earned trust among the people and can effect change.”²¹ Even among a diverse cultural and religious environment like Africa, a constant that flows across nearly all tribes and peoples is a reverence for the holy. Back in 2009, the Public Affairs Office at Ramstein Air Base ran a story on Air Force Chaplain Rex Williams who deployed to Africa to work with Air Force Chaplain Mark Barnes who, at that time, was serving as the Deputy Command Chaplain for AFRICOM.

During his deployment, Chaplain Williams and Chaplain Barnes traveled to Namibia to work with the Department of Defense HIV/AIDS Prevention Program. These two Air Force chaplains worked with the chaplains of the Namibian Defense Forces to train and develop the their chaplaincy program. The training included suicide prevention, caring for caregivers, and the role of chaplain assistants.²² Again, as Chaplain Cutler summarizes (in reference to the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa chaplain but it can be applied to all chaplains working in AFRICOM), “The CJTF-HOA chaplain can bring together Christian and Muslim organizations and leaders who share the values of peace and stability and their willingness to work together in order to resolve grassroots issues.”²³

Though, as described above, individual chaplains have taken the initiative to engage in RLE, until recently, a formal institutionalization of RLE has not been established within the three services--Army, Navy, and Air Force--that provides chaplains for the US armed forces. In fact, even the term “religious leader engagement” is not universally used among the three services.²⁴ However, the latest version of Joint Publication 1-05, *Religious Affairs in Joint Operations*, that oversees all Chaplain Corps operations in operational Combatant Commands affirms, “Chaplain liaison in support of military engagement is any command-directed contact or interaction where the chaplain, as the command’s religious representative, meets with a leader on matters of religion to ameliorate suffering and to promote peace and the benevolent expression of religion.”²⁵ Interestingly, military chaplains are the only government employees the US has who are charged with the responsibility of performing religious duties as well as representing the holy.²⁶ Furthermore, as military members, chaplains are often deployed to turbulent areas well before any additional government and non-government organizations (NGO) are even permitted to enter. And, even in locations where NGOs are already at work, chaplains may also have the

connections--especially with religious NGOs--to quickly build relationships and collaboration efforts.²⁷ As non-line, non-combatant military members, chaplains may even make inroads with NGOs who traditionally look negatively upon the armed forces.

Now, there are, however, several pitfalls to consider when engaging in RLE. One of the most significant is the possibility that the religious leaders who work and develop relationships with US military chaplains may place themselves in danger. As Chaplain Adams warns, "Careful consideration has to be given as to how much danger local leaders are placed in by meeting with a chaplain."²⁸ It is very easy to forget that local and tribal religious leaders do not necessarily have the backing of a powerful military like the chaplains. Care must be taken to understand the risks a local or tribal religious leader may have to take in order to connect with another religious leader--especially, a US military chaplain. The challenge is well phrased by Chaplain Kallerson who writes, "It is not a simple practice for a government agency to decide who is an extremist, who is a conservative, or who is a liberal while trying to understand what those terms mean in a globally religious context."²⁹

Nonetheless, the majority of experiences from RLE in OEF and OIF have shown that these relationships between religious leaders are mutually beneficial to both the US military and the local or tribal communities. Interestingly, as Chaplain Adams notes, "An unanticipated aspect of the interactions between chaplains and indigenous religious leaders in Iraq and Afghanistan was the level of openness of many clerics to Christian chaplains."³⁰ Several years ago, I served as the course director of one of three Air Force Chaplain Corps pre-deployment programs located on Creech Air Force Base, NV. As a part of the training, I took the chaplains who were preparing to deploy to a mosque in Las Vegas, NV to meet and spend some time with the imam. One of the most enlightening things I heard the imam say was that though we in the

US military try to hide our religious affiliation when we are deployed to an Islamic nation so that we do not “offend” them, it is not as if the people in those nations cannot tell that we are from the US. Furthermore, as US military members, the default presumption by the people of those nations is that we are all Christians. In other words, the imam reminded us that we should not be so arrogant as to assume that the people in the places we deployed are ignorant.

Truthfully, what is lacking in the Chaplain Corps is authentic training that takes seriously the other nation audiences’ perspective rather than the assumptions we make of that audience. Unfortunately, “religious engagement and diplomacy is largely overlooked in the professional and educational development of chaplains and chaplain assistants or religious program specialists [the title for chaplain assistants in the Navy].”³¹ Typically, the greatest concern the Chaplain Corps has of chaplains who may be engaged in RLE is that these chaplains do not neglect their primary duty to minister and care for the spiritual needs of the US military members and their families. Undoubtedly, this is a serious concern since, not only is this the core competency of each of the three US military Chaplain Corps, but also the expectation of the religious organizations that loan chaplains to the military. As Chaplain Adams clearly spells out, “Religious endorsing agents (i.e., churches, synagogues, and mosques) send their clergy into the military primarily to provide ministry to military personnel and their family members--not to serve as liaisons with religious leaders.”³²

So, the question remains: Is RLE a viable competency of the US Air Force Chaplain Corps? At least, according to JP 1-05, it is a capability that Air Force chaplains should be able to provide in joint deployed settings. As for the Army and the Navy (Navy chaplains also serve as chaplains for the Marines and the Coast Guard), their doctrine and guidance manuals provide for this capability. For instance, Army Field Manual 1-05 states, “Chaplains will support the

commander through advisement in the following areas that may influence CMO [civil-military operations]: Relations with indigenous religious leaders when directed by the commander.”

Furthermore, Naval Warfare Publication 1-05 explains, “Naval commanders may be designated as JTF [joint task force] commanders. In these situations, the senior chaplain has the following responsibilities: Functions as an intermediary between locals and the command on matters that may be religious, or as a spokesperson to foster awareness about indigenous concerns, issues, or attitudes.”³³ Strangely, Air Force Instructions 52-101 that guides Air Force chaplains is silent on this issue. The last policy letter on this issue published by the Air Force Chief of Chaplains office clearly states that Air Force chaplains will not engage in RLE.³⁴

Taking all the arguments above into consideration, what sort of recommendations can be made? It seems that if the Air Force Chaplain Corps ignores the importance of RLE as a real, wartime capability, Air Force chaplains will not be able to provide adequate service to their Combatant Commanders. Though current personnel shortages and underfunding pose a challenge, maybe the place to start is to rewrite Air Force Instructions 52-101 so that it reflects the language found in JP 1-05. The reality is, in our joint-centric climate, Air Force chaplains will be expected to deploy not only to joint deployed billets but also to fill taskings with the Army and Navy when they have shortfalls. The second course of action may be to develop a more robust religion and culture training at the Air Force Chaplain Corps College where all Air Force chaplain training takes place. Finally, looking at the long-term health of the Air Force Chaplain Corps, it would benefit to have the chaplain recruiters place a priority on those applicants who demonstrate an academic background and aptitude for RLE. Not all clergy applying to serve as chaplains in the Air Force have the aptitude for the kinds of jobs that they

will be called to do as a chaplain. A more rigorous vetting process will help ensure the investment the Air Force makes in new chaplains are beneficial for the long run.

These changes and recommendation will not be easy to accomplish in the current, under-resourced environment. Nonetheless, finding a way to provide our Combatant Commanders with RLE capability should be a priority for the Air Force Chaplain Corps. RLE has proven itself beneficial in combat and the senior-most levels of our government have endorsed its usefulness. Additionally, as Chaplain Adams admonishes, “Since there is frequently no longer a clear line of distinction between when combat operations end and stability operations begin, the US military cannot wait to begin stability operations until after combat has ended.”³⁵ Unfortunately, in the past, the Chaplain Corps has relied on a few motivated individuals to take the initiative to accomplish the mission at hand. However, to provide the best capabilities for our Combatant Commanders, it would be wise for the Air Force Chaplain Corps to consider what can be done in the short term to initiate change that will bear fruit in the long term.

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² Army Technical Publication (ATP) 1-05.03, *Religious Support and External Advisement*, 3 May 2013. ATP 1-05.03 refers to religious leader engagement (RLE) as "Soldier and Leader Engagement," but for consistency, I will use "RLE" to refer to the sorts of engagement that chaplains participate in with religious leaders of opposing forces or local national or indigenous people or tribes where the US military conducts its operations.

³ US Department of State, *Office of Religion and Global Affairs Fact Sheet*, 27 February 2015, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/pl/238144.htm>.

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⁷ I qualify that Chaplain Cutler is Jewish because Jewish chaplains represent a small minority in all three of the US Chaplain Corps and the tendency is to assume that a quoted chaplain is from a Christian denomination.

⁸ Jon Cutler, "The Role of the Military Chaplain in the '3D' Process," *InterAgency Journal*, Vol. 3, Issue 3 (Summer 2012): 41, <http://thesimonscenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/IAJ-3-3-pg40-50.pdf>.

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¹⁰ Ibid.

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¹² Kallerson, 2.

¹³ Army Technical Publication (ATP) 1-05.03, *Religious Support and External Advisement*, 3 May 2013.

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¹⁶ Ibid, vii.

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¹⁸ Ibid, 19.

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²⁴ Kallerson, 3.

²⁵ Joint Publication 1-05, *Religious Affairs in Joint Operations*, 20 November 2013.

²⁶ Ibid, 16.

²⁷ Thomas Vail, "Religious Engagement and Diplomacy: Training the 21st Century US Military Chaplaincy," *Military Intelligence Professional Bulletin* (US Army Intelligence Center and School, 2011), <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Religious+engagement+and+diplomacy%3A+training+the+21st+century+U.S....-a0263039943>.

²⁸ Adams, 18.

²⁹ Kallerson, 15.

³⁰ Adams, 27.

³¹ Vail.

³² Adams, 12.

³³ Ibid, 11.

³⁴ Air Force Chief of Chaplains, *Air Force Chaplain Corps Policy of Religious Leader Engagement*, 6 October 2009. This policy letter is no longer available on the Air Force Chaplain Corps SharePoint website.

³⁵ Adams, 37.

